



Longleaf

TREASURE

By KIM G. NIX, Editor

Abundant natural regeneration is found throughout the property.

Covington County, with its sandy soils and temperate climate, is an ideal area for growing longleaf in Alabama. The natural range of this pine includes most of the Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plains from southeastern Virginia to eastern Texas and south through northern Florida. While there were once 60 million acres of longleaf growing in this region, today there is only an esti-

mated 4 million acres. In recent years longleaf has been making a comeback, thanks in part to the efforts of landowners like Marion and Myra Mickelson. Actually, the Mickelsons have long been advocates of planting longleaf. Recognizing that their land is most suited to this species, the Mickelsons are managing their property to optimize the growth of longleaf.

Starting from Scratch

The Mickelsons acquired their 280 acres from Myra's father, who gave the property to the couple as an early inheritance in 1950. The property was cutover when they became the new owners. According to Marion, a person could stand in the middle of the property and see three-quarters of a mile in all directions. "There wasn't a tree in sight," he

Natural and Artificial Regeneration

About 240 acres of the property is in longleaf pine. The Mickelsons have used both natural and artificial regeneration methods on their TREASURE Forest. Approximately 60 acres have been planted in longleaf, while the remainder is natural. The pines range in age from 50 years on down to two years old.

The seedlings planted on one tract a few years ago were infected with brown-spot needle blight, which can stunt the growth of seedlings and even kill the young trees. Upon the advice of the Alabama Forestry Commission, the Mickelsons prescribed burned the tract and effectively eliminated the disease from the seedlings.

In 1986 the Mickelsons became some of the first landowners in Alabama to plant longleaf under the Conservation Reserve Program. "For my money, there's nothing better than a longleaf pine," says Marion. "Some people say they are harder to plant—and they are," he added. "But it's worth it." He cites the tree's disease and fire resistance, ease of management and the value of different products the tree yields as reasons, but also feels longleaf has special beauty.

County Forester Mike Older wishes more landowners had recognized the value of planting longleaf in years past. "Mr. Mickelson was just ahead of his time by planting longleaf," he said. "He's a good example of what you can do. He always saw what nature did and tried to imitate it."

During their years of ownership, the Mickelsons have had one large timber sale and several thinnings. The big sale came soon after they had put their three children, Arthur, Roger and Diane, through college. Myra thought their trees might be able to bring them some much-needed income. "I said, 'Marion, let's sell some of these trees. I'm tired of being broke!'" After receiving professional advice, the couple decided to sell 100 acres of timber. They were pleasantly surprised at what the trees brought. Except for one load of sawtimber, all the trees were cut for poles.

Twice they were forced to salvage timber that was downed by hurricanes, once in 1975 and then 20 years later

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The Mickelsons were approved for prescribed burning under the Stewardship Incentives cost-share program. Covington County Forester Mike Older, center, explains the paperwork to them.



Most of the trees are harvested for poles.

said. Their first order of business was to have firelanes plowed by the local Alabama Forestry Commission. Myra remembers paying 5 cents per acre for this service in the early 1950s. The Mickelsons had some of the first firelanes in the county and have set an example of responsible stewardship from the beginning.

During the first years of ownership it was impossible for the couple to manage the property hands-on. Marion's commit-

ment as a pilot in the Air Force meant the couple had to leave their newly built home for several years and spend time overseas. When they returned in 1967 after Marion's retirement from the military, they received a big surprise. Longleaf pine had naturally regenerated and covered the acreage. This was due in great part to some neighboring property owned by forest industry that contained mature pines. The Mickelsons believe that these trees seeded their property during the years they were away. It also helped that wildfires had burned on a regular basis and vegetative competition for the young pines was kept at bay. "It had burned almost every year that we were gone," said Marion.

Marion realized that fire is of special benefit to longleaf and has been dedicated to prescribe burning sections of the property every two to three years. Not only does fire reduce the competition from other species, Marion explains, but danger from wildfires is reduced as well. The major competition for the pines are plants like gallberry and yaupon.

This year the Mickelsons were approved for prescribed burning under the Stewardship Incentives Program. They are working with the Covington County office of the Forestry Commission to burn part of the property in 2001 and the remainder in 2002.

when Hurricane Opal devastated the area. Just prior to Hurricane Opal, the Mickelsons had thinned much of their timber. The bad timing meant that the hurricane did even greater damage than it would have otherwise. Openings in the forest allowed trees to be more easily downed by high winds. There are still a few scars from Opal here and there, but the property is in excellent shape and the Mickelsons are back on track with their management plan.

The acres under natural regeneration are being managed with the shelterwood method. The trees have been thinned enough so that the remaining ones are providing the seed for new trees. Young pines in the grass stage are visible throughout the property, and some are beginning their growth spurt out of this stage.

Wildlife Management

The primary objective for this TREASURE Forest is timber production, but a close second is wildlife management. It is not unusual for visitors on a drive through the property to see several turkeys. Regular thinnings and salvaging from storm damage—along with frequent prescribed burning—have left the land open and park-like. This kind of habitat is favored by species such as turkey and bobwhite quail. “My property is better for quail than most here in Covington County,” Marion said. Again he touts the use of prescribed burning, which stimulates the growth of food in the understory for quail and other animals.

Open areas where there were few or no trees were converted to food plots for wildlife. One of the six plots is planted in chufas, a favorite turkey food. Others are planted in various grains. Autumn olive and sawtooth oak have also been planted on the perimeter of pine plantations.

Although the property is not leased for hunting, the Mickelsons allow friends and neighbors to hunt. As a result, those friends and neighbors have taken on some responsibilities to aid the couple. They help plant and maintain food plots, build and put up tree stands, and have even constructed a tree stand for Marion with windows and a special chair. In addition, they also look out for tres-



Patches of hardwoods add diversity to this TREASURE Forest.



Open areas were converted to food plots for wildlife.

passers and potential poachers.

Bluebird boxes have been positioned throughout the property. Duck boxes are placed next to a pond that is shared with a neighbor. The Mickelsons enjoy watching all kinds of wildlife and can tell many stories about the beaver activity in the pond. One of Marion’s favorites is how he once found that his boat had been pushed from the edge of the pond by the beavers and used in the construction of their dam!

Although the majority of the property is in longleaf pine, there are spots of hardwoods along natural drainages. Different species of oaks provide acorns for deer, squirrels and other animals.

Setting an Example

The Mickelson have always enjoying hosting groups of people on their property. One of the first relationships formed was with the forestry students at Lurleen B. Wallace College in Andalusia. As a way to put into practice what they learned in the classroom, the students wrote a management plan for the Mickelsons’ property that was tailored to their objectives. Nearby W.S. Harlan Elementary School brings classes of fourth and fifth graders to visit the TREASURE Forest. In turn, the Mickelsons go into the classroom and talk with the students.

The Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center has also taken advantage of the nearby TREASURE Forest to help teach college students. While they were at the Dixon Center for forestry camp, students from Iowa State University visited the Mickelson property on two occasions. Their property was chosen so the students could see examples of both planted pines and naturally regenerated pines. The TREASURE Forest concept was also highlighted.

Marion and Myra have been active members of the Covington County Forestry Planning Committee for many years and are members of their county chapter of the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association. Their property was certified as TREASURE Forest #773 in 1990. It is also a certified Tree Farm. Out of more than 1,400 TREASURE Forest landowners, each year four are chosen as winners of the Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award. In 2000 the Mickelsons were honored with this award for the Southeast Region of the state.

It is hard to calculate how one’s contact with others will affect the future. As a result of the Mickelsons’ involvement in the TREASURE Forest program, two of their nephews now have certified TREASURE Forests. Their son Roger has purchased 40 acres nearby and is actively managing it. The Mickelsons’ interaction with students from elementary school to college may well result in future landowners and land managers who are better stewards than they would be otherwise. The Mickelsons have set an example that all of us can follow. 🏡